

By Dick Myers, TheBayNet.com

"We must tell our children, black and white, to turn the TV off and read a book." Education was the key message of the keynote speaker at the 31st Anniversary 5th Congressional District Black History Month Celebration Saturday at the Greater Waldorf Jaycees Center. It is the longest running such celebration in the country.

Dr. Freeman Hrabowski, president of University of Maryland, Baltimore County since 1992, was introduced by Rep. Steny Hoyer (D: 5th) as a man who "Time Magazine called one of our nation's top ten college presidents – an outstanding educator and an advocate for expanding access to education for more of our nation's students." Hrabowski knows about the value of education first hand from his family's experience. His father wanted to go to college but was concerned his family wouldn't be able to work their farm. His grandmother ordered her son to go to college and said she would take his place behind the plow instead.

Hrabowski grew up in Birmingham, Alabama during the Civil Rights struggles there. As a child he wanted to march but his parents at first were reluctant but the next morning decided to let him march because "It was the right thing to do."

On the march Hrabowski came face to face with the legendary segregationist police chief Bull Connor. When asked why he was there, he told Connor, "All we want to do is kneel and pray for our freedom." Connor spit in his face and Hrabowski along with the rest of the marchers were put in jail. Dr. Martin Luther King told those who had been jailed, "What you do this day, will help generations to come."

The college president said Dr. King had a dream to excite all the races about learning. He said there has been progress including an increase in the numbers of people with college degrees from 10 percent during the 60's to 30 percent today, but more needs to be done because a college education is necessary for everyone's economic success.

"Study more," was Dr. Hrabowski's message to young people and "Get in the schools and support the teachers," was his message to parents. He concluded by saying, "We must take responsibility for our children," which was met with a standing ovation from the several hundred people in attendance at the breakfast.

Sen. Benjamin Cardin (D) was also in attendance. Hoyer praised Cardin for his work on health care reform and Cardin in turn called Hoyer “one of the great national leaders in America.” Cardin thanked Hoyer, “For the opportunity to bring all of us together.”

Hoyer in his opening remarks said, “Black history has always been a complex subject here in Maryland. Ours was, we must remember with sorrow, a slave state – and one of the first places where African slavery took hold on this continent. At the same time, some of the earliest abolitionists raised their voices in Baltimore to pass one of the nation’s first anti-slavery laws in the 1790s, which for the first time allowed slave-owners to set slaves free.

“On one side of the State House in Annapolis stands a statue of Roger Taney, the Supreme Court Justice who delivered the Dred Scott decision. Yet, on the other side of our State House stands a statue of a man whose life was a forceful dissent against it and who became the first African-American to sit on our nation’s highest court. We also look back to Marylanders like Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass who defied injustice with the courage of giants.

“Black history month is a time to celebrate the contributions African-Americans have made to this nation from government to business, from the arts to the law, in science, in education, and in national service. We honor the African-Americans who gave their lives fighting overseas for democracy, even during those times when they found democracy just out of their reach at home.

“Each year, I look forward to this gathering in our community to celebrate Black History Month and hear from some of those who are the movers and shakers in forging our shared history today. We’ve had the venerable John Lewis, with whom I feel privileged to serve every day in the halls of Congress. We’ve had Ron Kirk, Valerie Jarrett from the Obama Administration, and we heard from Eric Holder before he was Attorney General.

“In fact, we welcomed then-Senator Barack Obama to this breakfast a few years ago before we had any idea he’d make history as president. Well, actually that isn’t entirely true. I think we all had a feeling he would end up in the White House after hearing him speak.”

In closing remarks, Hoyer said “In a speech that continues to move our hearts today, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King shared his dream of an America where ‘the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave-owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.’ I like to think Dr. King would be filled with spirit if he were with us here today at this breakfast.

“Our state has a long and rich black history, a juxtaposition of the bitter waters of slavery and the powerful thirst for freedom, of setback and advancement, of exclusion and equality. It is that complex history we come together to mark this morning – and by coming together we are celebrating that the arc of our history has continued its bend toward what Justice Thurgood Marshall practiced and for which Harriet Tubman risked her life.

“Black History Month is an opportunity to come together around tables like these and set them with the hopes and dreams we have for Maryland and for this nation over the years to come. Hopes and dreams that include a reduction in poverty, hunger, homelessness, and despair, which continue to plague many of our communities. It is a chance to draw comfort and hope for a better future from the eternal words of scripture – and I quote from Luke 22:30: ‘You will eat and drink at my table in my kingdom.’

“Let us mark this month together as one state and one community by continuing to make Dr. King’s immortal words ring true. May we continue to set a table of brotherhood for ourselves and our children for all time.”

Congressman Hoyer, who attended as a guest of the Black History Month Planning Committee, helped launch the annual breakfast when he became a Member of Congress in 1981.